DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 253 313 PS 014 842

AUTHOR Brown, June
TITLE Missouri Teachers Experience Stress.
PUB DATE [84]
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Age Differences; Class Size; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Teachers; Parent Attitudes; Questionnaires; Rating Scales; Research Needs; *Rural Schools; School Size; *Stress Variables; Student Attitudes; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Education
IDENTIFIERS *Missouri

ABSTRACT

A replication of earlier research involving elementary and secondary teachers in urban schools, this study was conducted to identify selected stress factors experienced by rural elementary school teachers and to analyze relationships between stress symptoms and the degree of stress. A stratified random sample of 387 teachers was mailed a questionnaire using Likert-type scales; the response rate was 70 percent. Results indicated that the majority of respondents perceived their profession to be stressful. Ten factors were found to be most stressful, and five stress symptoms were reported as occurring most frequently. It was discovered that, as the age of the teacher increased, the degree of stress associated with the school administration's inadequacy and parent criticism/interference decreased. Also, as the grade level increased, the degree of stress associated with student values/attitudes increased. Teachers with larger classes found overcrowded classrooms more stressful, and teachers with a large number of students in their buildings found parent values/attitudes more stressful. The following recommendations were made: (1) Teacher stress should receive a larger focus in teacher training; (2) Data on teacher stress might be made useful to school boards and administrators by targeting research toward individual schools and school districts; and (3) Future stress research could focus on specific groups of teachers, including beginning teachers. (CB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☒ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
N. June Brown
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED253313

MISSOURI TEACHERS EXPERIENCE STRESS

June Brown

Overview

Teacher stress represents a growing problem which has demanded national attention. A teacher health survey conducted by Instructor magazine found stress the worst health problem with which teachers must deal.[1] Hunter declares the three most potentially stressful occupations in the world are air traffic control, surgery, and teaching.[2] Statistics compiled by the National Education Association indicate that anxiety, tension, and strain that teachers experience have increased dramatically since 1938. Increasing numbers of educators are becoming more vocal in their disenchantment with their profession. In addition, many teachers are suffering from burnout and thus leaving the teaching field.

At the present time, research into teacher stress is still in its infancy. One reason for this lack of research may be because of the numerous definitions, references, and uses of the term stress. The wide variety of definitions of stress makes its meaning ambiguous. A review of the literature on stress clearly indicated the difficulty researchers have had in defining the term. Various investigators have employed terms such as anxiety, tension, frustration, conflict, and strain to refer to the stress phenomena.

What is Stress?

Dr. Hans Selye has defined stress as "the nonspecific response of the body to any demand made upon it."[3] He has emphasized that stress is a normal part of the body's functioning and impossible to avoid. Total

PS 014842

absence of stress results in death. Stress is usually thought of in negative terms; however, it can be not only unpleasant but positive as well. Therefore, stress has been delineated into positive and negative aspects—eustress and distress. According to Selye, eustress refers to stress associated with achievement, winning, and desirable events in life. In contrast, distress occurs when the individual feels insecure, inadequate, or helpless. Both types of stress will adversely affect an individual by reducing the reservoir of energy a person possesses; however, distress will deplete this energy at a much faster rate than will eustress.

Stress itself is not inherently good or bad. The extent to which stress affects the individual and the reaction to such stress are dependent on the individuals themselves. Most people can deal with crises on an occasional basis; however, repeated trauma will eventually affect most people adversely. In other words, the specific situation and the unique individual characteristics will determine, to a large degree, one's perception as to whether an event is distressful or challenging.

Educational literature suggests that teacher stress has reached epidemic proportions in many schools. It is apparent that occupational stress has diminished the satisfaction that many teachers obtain from their profession, caused numerous educators to choose alternative careers, and depleted the energy that many teachers bring to the classroom.

In order to help teachers manage stress, it is necessary to identify specific stress factors. Once the occupational stress factors have been identified, strategies can be developed to help them learn to alleviate and cope with stress. Locating the source of stress can have a therapeutic effect. Selye has stated, "the mere fact of knowing what hurts you has an inherent curative value."[4]

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of a recent study conducted in southwest Missouri was to identify and analyze selected stress factors as perceived by elementary teachers. In addition, the study analyzed relationships between selected stress symptoms and the degree of stress as reported by elementary teachers.

A secondary purpose of this study was to ascertain what relationships exist among the factors perceived most stressful by teachers and the following selected variables: sex, age, present teaching assignment, years at present teaching assignment, years of teaching experience, number of students in classroom, number of students in school, and population of town.

Description of the Sample

A review of the literature revealed most of the str research in the United States has been conducted in large metropolitan areas utilizing volunteer samples combining both elementary and secondary teachers. Cichon and Koff have recommended stress research be replicated ir different communities where teachers are not unduly pressured by inner city, survival issues.[5] In response to this recommendation, the geographical location chosen for this present research was the 24 county district of southwest Missouri. Within this 24 county district, most of the schools are located in rural areas while only one city exceeds the population of 100,000.

The Department of Elementary Education of Southwest Missouri

State University, Springfield, serves a large number of teacher education majors who later teach in the surrounding 24 county district. Therefore, it seemed beneficial to study selected factors which possibly effect teaching performance within this geographical location. An investigation of teacher stress in public schools of varying size within this geographical region could broaden the research approach and knowledge. Teachers' perceptions of stress in small and medium-sized schools may differ from those in large, urban districts.

In addition, most stress research has utilized a combined sample of elementary and secondary teachers, who voluntarily respond to stress questionnaires. Because of possible differences between elementary and secondary teachers' perceptions of stress, the investigator conducted a systematic examination of stress as perceived by a group of randomly selected elementary teachers from within the 24 county district of southwest Missouri.

The Missouri State Department of Education prepares an annual list of all the Missouri public school teachers. By utilizing computer services at Southwest Missouri State University, it was possible to identify approximately 3,500 public school elementary teachers employed within the 24 county district of southwest Missouri. It seemed appropriate to use stratification to assure that the sample was representative of the population. Therefore, a stratified random sample of 387 teachers was selected consisting of approximately 10 percent from each of the 24 counties. This sample included teachers from kindergarten through sixth grade as well as some specialized elementary teachers, i.e., remedial reading, remedial math, special education, physical education, music, art, and speech.

Development of the Instrument

Since no appropriate instrument was found to gather data, devising a questionnaire to identify the perceived stress factors of elementary teachers became necessary to accomplish the purpose of the study. The first step toward developing an instrument to measure perceived stress was the construction of questionnaire items. An extensive review of related literature was conducted for reported sources and symptoms of stress. The findings of the literature review resulted in a collection of Likert-type stimulus items. In addition, 29 elementary teachers enrolled in graduate courses at Southwest Missouri State University were asked to contribute a list of 10 most stressful events related to their profession. The teachers' responses not already in the collection were added to the Likert-type items. The information gathered from these sources was compiled into the Southwest Missouri State University Teacher Stress Survey.

Procedure for Data Collection

During the fall semester, 1981, the Southwest Missouri State University Teacher Stress Survey was mailed to 387 elementary teachers within the 24 county district of southwest Missouri. A follow-up survey was mailed to all non-respondents after a four week period. There were 271 responses (70 percent) to the survey, including some returns from each of the 24 counties.

Conclusions

The data collected in this study indicate the majority of the respondents perceive their profession to be stressful. More than half of the elementary teachers (53 percent) rated their profession as "decidedly" or

"extremely" stressful. In contrast, only three teachers (one percent) reported teaching to be "not at all" stressful.

Teachers in southwest Missouri rated the following ten factors most stressful: inadequate salary; student values/attitudes; discipline problems; teaching children with a wide range of abilities; poor student motivation; parent values/attitudes; work overload; insufficient preparation time; inadequate personal breaks; and lack of community support.

The five stress symptoms teachers reported experiencing most frequently were: exhaustion, tension, irritability, anger, and headache.

Some significant relationships were discovered in the study:

As the age of the teacher increased, the degree of stress associated with the **administration's lack of ability** decreased;

The older the teacher, the less stressful **parent criticism/interference;**

As the grade level increased, the degree of stress associated with **student values/attitudes** increased;

Teachers with larger class sizes find **overcrowded classrooms** more stressful;

Teachers with a large number of students in their buildings find **parent values/attitudes** more stressful.

There were no significant differences between male and female teachers' perceptions of stress factors. Regardless of the total years of teaching experience, no significant differences were found among the teachers' perceptions of stress.

Recommendations

1. It was noted in this study that a majority of the responding teachers consider their profession to be "decidedly" to "extremely" stressful. Therefore it is recommended that teacher stress receive a larger focus in pre-service and in-service education for teachers. Prospective teachers need to have stress information available to assist in their decision-making processes. They could learn successful coping strategies for handling stressful situations in their undergraduate programs. In-service education should provide opportunities for teachers to identify sources of stress and learn techniques to alleviate or reduce the consequences of stress. Both pre-service and in-service education should include instruction in assertiveness and the development of interpersonal skills as well as training in stress-reducing techniques such as meditation and biofeedback.

2. Data collected in teacher stress research might be useful to school boards and administrators. Although national trends related to stress are interesting, it is recommended that more research be conducted within individual school systems or buildings. Specific measures of stress within a unique system might be helpful to administrators for planning curricula, faculty, or policy changes. Teacher stress is increasingly likely to become a part of collective bargaining with emphasis upon inadequate salary. By utilizing stress research, administrators might be able to make some changes without additional cost, i.e., allowing greater teacher involvement in decision making. Furthermore, it is recommended that teacher stress research be conducted longitudinally so that changes in stress situations and responses during the school year could be recorded and used by school boards and administrations.

3. Future stress research could focus on specific groups of teachers, i.e., elementary, middle school, and secondary. In addition, it might be helpful to examine stressors that affect first-year teachers in order to avoid problems of beginning teachers. Data collected from a study of stress related to beginning teachers could be useful to prospective education students, student teachers, and departments of education.

---

[1]Robert Sylwester, "Stress," Instructor, 86:72, March, 1977.

[2]Madeline Hunter, "Counterirritants to Teaching," Instructor, 87:122, August, 1977.

[3]Hans Selye, Stress Without Distress (New York: Lippincott, 1974), p. 27.

[4]Hans Selye, The Stress of Life, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956), p. 260.

[5]Donald Cichon and Robert Koff, "Stress and Teaching," National Association of Secondary School Principals, 64:102, March, 1980.